

October 15, 2005

Script for *Fabulous Furry Tales* podcast #1

Welcome to *Altivo's Fabulous Furry Tales*, a discussion of furry literature and related arts, presented every week or two. I'm your host, Altivo, the Clydesdale librarian. Some of you may know me from Livejournal.com, and others may know me as simply 'Tivo, from Furrymuck. I hope you'll travel along with me on a voyage through furry literature over the coming winter months. It's a participatory trip, though, so I hope I'll be hearing from you by e-mail or on Livejournal. I fully expect to be learning as much from you as you may learn from me.

The introductory song was "Me and my Horse with Wings" by Laurie Connable, and you can find her entire CD at creativecommons.org on the web. I encourage you to give her a listen.

I hope to be hearing from some of you and sharing your thoughts very soon, but obviously the mailbox is empty when we just start out. For now, I'd like to share a series of introductory thoughts with you. This week's introductory topic is:

The Beginnings of Furry Literature

Animals have been used in storytelling for as far back as written records or spoken histories can reach. The Egyptian gods will serve as a prime example of anthropomorphics, and Aesop's *Fables* are a familiar example of the animal used to represent stereotypical human traits. Middle English author Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) used birds in this manner in his *Parliament of Fowles*, a poetic account of a meeting of various birds who probably represented political factions of his time.

But where do we look for the first example of modern literature in which animals are given speech and a rational life of their own? Perhaps Anna Sewell (1820-1878) did this first in her novel *Black Beauty*, published in 1877. Anna Sewell was an English Quaker, and from her religious faith derived a sense of responsibility for humane treatment of animals. In *Black Beauty* she campaigned effectively for that cause by letting a London cab horse tell his own life story in the first person:

"Those who have never had a bit in their mouths cannot think how bad it feels; a great piece of cold hard steel as thick as a man's finger to be pushed into your mouth, between your teeth and over your tongue, with the ends coming out at the corners of your mouth, and held fast there by straps over your head, under your throat, around your nose, and under your chin; so that in no way in the world can you get rid of the nasty hard thing."

Of course, Beauty's story is not made up entirely of pain and suffering. He learns that there are good and kind humans as well as wicked and thoughtless ones, and eventually finds his way to a happy retirement in a quiet pasture, though certainly many of his friends are not so fortunate.

Other writers took a similar approach. Canadian writer Margaret Marshall Saunders (1861-1947) won a Humane Society competition when her novel *Beautiful Joe* was published in 1893. This book, which also uses first person narrative to present the thoughts and experience of an animal, tells the terrible sufferings of a terrier puppy who is abused and rejected by humans before finally finding acceptance. One of the competition judges, author Hezekiah Butterworth, summed up Saunders' approach in these words: "Through it we enter the animal world, and are made to see as animals see, and to feel as animals feel."

Here is an example of Saunders' rendition of the dog's experience:

"As I sat by her, feeling lonely and miserable, Jenkins came into the stable. I could not bear to look at him. He had killed my mother. There she lay, a little, gaunt, scarred creature, starved and worried to death by him. Her mouth was half open, her eyes were staring. She would never again look kindly at me, or curl up to me at night to keep me warm. Oh, how I hated her murderer! But I sat quietly, even when he went up and turned her over with his foot to see if she was really dead. I think he was a little sorry, for he turned scornfully toward me and said, 'She was worth two of you; why didn't you go instead?'

"Still I kept quiet till he walked up to me and kicked at me. My heart was nearly broken and I could stand no more. I flew at him and gave him a savage bite on the ankle.

"'Oho,' he said, 'so you are going to be a fighter, are you? I'll fix you for that.' His face was red and furious. He seized me by the back of the neck and carried me out to the yard where a log lay on the ground. 'Bill,' he called to one of his children, 'bring me the hatchet.'"

Black Beauty and *Beautiful Joe* have been reprinted and translated dozens of times, and circulated in tens of millions of copies that were often distributed as part of anti-cruelty campaigns. Both novels are remarkable in themselves for presenting the animal's viewpoint, seen through the animal's eyes and with the animal's understanding.

American writer Mark Twain, usually noted for his humor and sarcasm, used the same autobiographical technique in his two stories, "A Dog's Tale" and "A Horse's Tale", published in 1904 and 1907 respectively. Neither is very well known, but both are emotional outbursts against human cruelty to animals, presented in a manner similar to that of Sewell and Saunders. These stories are probably not familiar to many of today's readers, but are well worth looking up.

A better known example from the 20th century would be *Bambi*, by Felix Salten. That was a pseudonym taken by German author Siegmund Saltzmann (1869-1945,) who was living in Vienna when *Bambi* was published in 1923. The book is a powerful indictment of sport hunting, and was banned by the Nazi government in 1936. It came to the attention of the English-speaking world when it was published in translation in 1928. Walt Disney added impetus to the tale when he released his animated film version in 1942.

Unlike his predecessors, Salten told his story in third person, but nonetheless from the viewpoint of a deer. Here is a brief quote:

“A dying pheasant, with its neck twisted, lay on the snow, beating feebly with its wings. When he heard Bambi coming he ceased his convulsive movements and whispered: ‘It’s all over with me.’ Bambi paid no attention to him and ran on.

“A tangle of bushes he blundered into forced him to slacken his pace and look for a path. He pawed the ground impatiently with his hoofs. ‘This way!’ called someone with a gasping voice. Bambi obeyed involuntarily and found an opening at once. Someone moved feebly in front of him. It was Friend Hare’s wife who had called.

“‘Can you help me a little?’ she said. Bambi looked at her and shuddered. Her hind leg dangled lifelessly in the snow, dyeing it red and melting it with warm, oozing blood. ‘Can you help me a little?’ she repeated. She spoke as if she were well and whole, almost as if she were happy. ‘I don’t know what can have happened to me,’ she went on. ‘There’s really no sense to it, but I just can’t seem to walk...’

“In the middle of her words she rolled over on her side and died. Bambi was seized with horror again and ran.”

We should note that none of these writers originally had children in mind as their primary audience. These are books for adults, with graphic and horrible events related in accurate detail. Many bowdlerized versions have been created, and today we tend to think of Beauty, Joe, and Bambi as children’s characters, or worse yet in the last case, as a Disney character, coated with sugar. By all means, if you have never done so, find and read the uncut originals of these novels.

Powerful writing that uses the same mechanism continues to come out. I can’t end a discussion of this genre without mentioning American nature writer and educator Thornton W. Burgess, whose newspaper columns and children’s books were popular throughout the first half of the 20th century. I also note British author Richard Adams, whose novels *Watership Down* and *The Plague Dogs* continue in the same tradition that Sewell started with *Black Beauty*. But it was left to others to really anthropomorphize the animal, putting him with varying degrees of success into a world that mixes the human and the animal environment. I’m inclined to give a nod to Lewis Carroll and Beatrix Potter for early attempts, and to Kenneth

Grahame's 1908 novel, *The Wind in the Willows*, for the first major success in that genre. We'll certainly touch on all of these authors in future editions of *Fabulous Furry Tales*.

Listeners may have other works they would like to suggest as progenitors of modern furry fiction, and I'd certainly welcome your comments. You can send e-mail to altivo at livejournal dot com. Until next time then, good reading to all.

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